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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2210

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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE MUSLIMS HAVE HOPE BUT WANT CHANGE

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11. (SBU) Summary. Singapore's Muslims welcome the Obama presidency as "a new era of hope," but are waiting to see what new steps the United States will take, Hajji Mohammad Alami Musa, President of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), told the Charge d' Affaires (CDA) on February 12. (Note: MUIS is a statutory body responsible for making policies related to Singapore's Muslim community. End Note.) Two key areas in which Singapore's Muslims are hoping for changes are U.S. policy in the Middle East and development assistance for the Muslim world. End Summary.

12. (SBU) In response to reftel, Post distributed the transcript of President Obama's interview with al-Arabiya to approximately 100 key Muslim contacts. The CDA also met with Alami and his staff to deliver the follow-up points in reftel and to exchange views on United States-Muslim relations. President Obama's overtures have received widespread press coverage and the public response has been positive. Alami said the Singapore Muslim community believes that there is now an opportunity for improved relations following many years during which U.S. policies towards the Islamic world were "quite repressive and very negative." In response to receiving the interview transcript, Member of Parliament Zaqy Mohamad replied, "the President's move is certainly a good one to broach this sensitive subject at the outset."

13. (SBU) Alami suggested some of this optimism comes from an impression that President Obama can relate to the powerless and said Singapore's Muslims were jubilant over President Obama's election. Alami applauded the USG's outreach to Muslims in Indonesia, and noted that Muslims in Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei also want to work with the USG to promote enhanced mutual understanding and respect. Khartini Khalid, a lecturer at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, told PDOff on February 13 that her students often speak of President Obama's election as an achievement and an inspiration for minorities. Others, such as Zalman Putra Ahmad Ali of MUIS, cite what they see as specific characteristics of President Obama, such as a nuanced approach that "sees the diversity of the Muslim world" and his willingness to engage in dialogue as reasons to hope for better relations.

13. (SBU) Despite these positive sentiments, Singapore's Muslims are "not fully embracing" President Obama until they see what policies his administration will follow, said Khalid. U.S. Middle East policy is the key barometer for viewing the United States, said Albakri Ahmad, Dean of the MUIS Academy. Muslims believe progress in the Middle East peace process depends on the United States and from the Muslim perspective, the United States could put much more pressure on Israel, said Alami. Khalid expressed doubts about how far President Obama would go to restrain Israel and Alami said skeptics fear President Obama may soon "settle in

to the status quo."

14. (SBU) Making a substantial investment in development and education assistance to the Muslim world would be another way for the United States to further global peace and demonstrate its commitment to improving relations, said Alami. This is especially important now as the Muslim world will likely suffer greatly in the economic crisis, said Asri Aziz of MUIS. Alami also offered to host an inter-faith dialogue session if President Obama visits Singapore.

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